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ABSTRACT

In this discussion of teacher empowerment, areas related to teacher sense of impact or efficacy are examined. These areas include: (1) administrative support; (2) responsibility for meaningful tasks; (3) control/decision making related to curriculum; (4) decisions on teaching assignments; (5) input on policies and procedures; and (6) choice in and determination of staff development. In discussing the role of the administrator in implementing teacher empowerment, it is pointed out that talented teachers must be discovered through careful observation and listening to their comments. Administrators need to identify the enthusiastic learner, the questioner, and the discriminating volunteer. (JD)

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EMPOWERING TEACHERS

THE KEY TO SCHOOL BASED REFORM

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Empowering Teachers:

The Key to School Based Reform

> The ultimate use of power should be to empower others (Glasser, 1987).
>
> Power is awareness in conceptualizing outstanding talent and awareness of that awareness strengthens the individual. (Clifton, 1987).
>
> School for 1990 and beyond will be intellectually stimulating environments with teachers as members of a decision-making, collaborative, implementing team. (Costa, 1988).

Empowerment and reform appear to be the words of current attention in education. Interestingly and necessarily, the definitions of these vary with each author. Rightly so, for each writer must relate to site specific aspects of restructuring or reforming the learning environment. Empowerment is a process, not a ready-made level of one-size-fits-all solution. In fact, empowerment is hard work with a demanding professionalism.

The concern then is not what the audience holds as a definition but the generalizations extracted and subsequently applied at the new site. The red flags need to be up if empowerment is viewed as a uniformly fashioned solution.

Concepts and ideas unique to new environments deserve the necessary germination of site needs. With the concepts is the critically necessary ownership of the process, product and goals by the people to work the renorming of education.

Empowering teachers in a decentralized district is far less threatening to administrators and less risky to teachers. In traditional centralized structures relinquishing power takes several stages prior to reaching the school sites. The "quick fix" strategy is more accurately called delegation. Whatever the format, it is important to allow time for empowerment to result.

The process of empowerment involves time and structure to allow for the development of an attitude in which change is the norm, in which risk is tempered and administrative support is extensive. Professional roles and environmental settings in an empowered climate are new. The fear of the unknown, the strangeness of a global setting, and an accountability factor are linked closely to empowerment patterns.

In the same vein, one should not presume that segments of school-based management have not been in place in educational settings. Teacher initiated projects, committee responsibility, and resultant accountability have been practiced by dedicated educators whether labeled site-based or not. At the same time, all that has been practiced as committee work can not be equated to empowering practices.

What empowerment is or isn't and what it can produce are intertwined with the philosophy that all students can learn; that teachers can teach and lead; and that learning takes place in a collegial environment. (Goodlad, 1987). Needed is a dynamic action plan based on a solid foundation and rooted in self-confidence. Reform and renorming the school system underlie the belief system empowering teachers and students.

A definition of empowerment as a sense of impact (making a difference) and as having a degree of control in one's professional destiny met teacher strong agreement in a survey conducted during spring, 1988. In the survey a ranking of factors identified in the literature was requested. These areas related to teacher sense of impact or efficacy were noted in the following priority rating.

1. Administrative support
2. Responsibility for meaningful tasks
3. Control/decision making related to curriculum
4. Decisions on teaching assignments
5. Input on policies and procedures
6. Choice in and determination of staff development

If empowerment is held to be site specific, aspects of how the above factors are lived on any one campus necessarily limit generalizations and should be accepted in that view. Administrative support refers to the professional helping relationship of a caring community. Helping relationships require direction. In them a leader defines the growth facilitating exercises which subsequently promote teacher sense of worth. Peters and Waterman (1982) describe the principal-demonstrated behaviors that support teachers as product champions, the products being both teacher recognition and student achievement.

Teacher expertise is often focused to classroom changes, a necessarily narrow view. School leadership, according to Barth (1987) must bring to heightened awareness a vision and a global perspective. Administrators may be idea people and provide the initial impetus. However, the follow-up to ideas produces confidence that the process is valued. An effort to bring resources (human, time and finances) evidences leadership belief in teacher skills.

These day to day practices are interpreted as the administration's commitment to positively impacting others. Earning the trust concomitant to living this commitment precedes movement through the process called participatory management (Royer, 1987).

Administrator skill in framing problems to give teachers power (Cuban, 1988) involves cutting red tape, providing knowledge base, and effecting precise communication patterns.

When entrusting others with responsibilities, programs or single tasks, we project our confidence through personal deportment. Credibility is a word bantered about, yet without mutual trust and dependability, delegation replaces empowerment.

Teachers will empower students to the degree they feel confident in their ability to release control of their "world." Teachers will experience greater decision making if that process is modeled for them in a consistent and professional pattern. "... I relate to a strong role model..." These patterns necessarily relate to a knowledge base, experiential opportunity and structured accountability. Maeroff (1987) notes the developmental nature of empowerment with a strong linkage to self-confidence.

The crisis of confidence Maeroff (1987) notes underlies each ranking. How a teacher perceives is his or her reality. Perceptions of worth and the power to make a difference is nurtured by success. Achievement founded in ability enhances the adult self-esteem.

Accomplishment and value through meaningful work reinforces one's belief of being valued. Teachers help define that meaningfulness. Combs (1988) points out that lack of importance or a feeling of unworthiness feeds apathy, frustration and burn-out. Critical is administrator skill in matching task and doer, which can not be overlooked. Subtle yearnings, identified expertise, or intuition based inquiry (invitation to the silent) expand the pool of respondants to address a new role or responsibility.

As Don Clifton notes, we cannot create talent, we can only discover talent. For a teacher to be empowered, his/her unique talent must be discovered. Active listening is one process useful in this discovery. Paying attention to statements such as "I might like..." or "I've often wondered about..." enables administrators to probe for talent. Cultivating an environment for experience allows a satisfaction phrase like "I enjoy doing..." to surface. Administrators need to watch for the enthusiastic learner, the questioner, or the discriminating volunteer. Teacher yearnings reflect the potential for empowerment. Instructional leaders must necessarily be skillful in matching clues of interest with opportunity. These patterns evidence the readiness of teachers to reach out; yes, to risk. Teachers ready to risk need to have a listener, a mentor, a professional trusted colleague. Talent emerges in response to dialogue. Some very accurate predictions evolve from listening to what people have to say. (Clifton, SRI).

There is power in awareness. Knowing something about a teacher and understanding that uniqueness generate even more power when feedback is provided the professional. Having one's strengths appreciated is fundamental to one's growth and a focused commitment to use those strengths.

"...faith placed in me and being treated professionally..."
"...trust with the backup of resources spur me to complete a task with pride..."
"...requesting me evidenced regard for me..."

Traditionally, the four walls and classroom management have been the parameters of decision making for teachers. With information doubling at a mind-boggling pace, the tasks of curriculum updating and making decisions related to what will and should be taught return to those responsible for implementation. In this regard, collaborative skills are critical to change and to the dispelling of teacher feelings of powerlessness (Maeroff, 1987). Successful schools value collegial activities and exhibit strong teacher interaction.

Involvement in the process to validate decisions and to maintain curricular integrity reinforces professionalism. Cooperative strategies apply to adult learning as well as student learning. Curricular decisions epitomize the interdependent factors of collaborative practices. The innovative BLOCK, Cluster and seminar programs enable teachers to gain a first-hand experience of change. To meet these tasks teaching assignments, professional and personal characteristics were openly examined.

In these programs, traditional timeframes and course "coverage" patterns changed. Teachers not only planned for change, rewrote and integrated subject matter areas but subsequently have worked the process assessing and modifying as they experience the new. Peer observation/ evaluation has moved collegial networking to a new level. Decisions related to curriculum and teaching assignments link to teacher belief in self and expertise.

Schoolwide staff development determined by identified needs, planning, budgeting and presentation is in direct relation to this structured practice. Keeping the currency of teachers (Knowledge) up-to-date is the function of staff development (Maeroff, 1988).

> "...ability to design personal professional goals with encouragement to change..."
> "...peer observation has enriched my professional relationship with my colleagues..."

Input and involvement in the design of policies and procedures governing schooling apprise teachers of the "big picture." An awareness of how practices beyond instruction impact the learning environment is critical to reform.

The practices identified by Barth (1987) of leadership, participation, staff development and trust building are reflected in the teacher rankings. Implementation of lasting change has greater probability where these elements of professionalism are in place.

Teacher perceptions of elements that nurture a climate (school culture) conducive to empowerment are reflected in the following ranking. Repetition of ratings related to trust, networking and decision making at the classroom level indicates the close relationship of climate (situational needs) and organizational structure.

1. Communication
2. Higher teacher salaries
3. Professional support (networking)
4. Decision making power at the classroom level
5. Recognition of teacher accomplishment

With this parallel of climate and factors to implement change, the importance of a balance in process and product must always be foremost.

Teacher salaries alone nor special efforts to recognize the instructional achievements stand alone. They reflect the perception of worth and value. The reality is that empowerment will require work - even greater investment with accountability. This shouldn't deter targeted patterns, but must be up front, as a perception of power without consequence would be ludicrous.

All factors in the brief study link with reports in the literature. The uniqueness is how any empowerment is lived everyday. Qualitative assessment measures will afford more accurate evaluation of the school renewal process increasingly prevalant in the profession.

Empowerment emphasizes the process, not preconceived outcomes. The profession's willingness to challenge and pursue an open system of thinking and systematic collaboration will determine the level to which school based reform is in place in the 21st Century.

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